

# Tracking Kenai Peninsula brown bears good for research

by Rick Ernst

Seeing a brown bear is a thrill for most folks. Something to be remembered for a long time, if not a lifetime. Bears invoke a sense of awe and power. They are a symbol of vast, wild country.

I am one of the lucky ones. My job is to track and observe these elusive critters. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is working with biologists from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Chugach National Forest and Kenai Fjords National Park to study and conserve brown bears on the Kenai Peninsula. Wildlife Forever and the local Safari Club provided financial support for this study.

One of the best ways of gathering information on bears is through radio telemetry. This interagency effort has captured more than 80 brown bears since 1995. Almost all have been females or sows. The oldest bear captured was 22.

Captured bears were ear-tagged, measured for total length, skull width and length and chest girth. Blood and hair samples were collected to help determine nutritional condition and health status. A premolar tooth was extracted for age determination. Currently 35 sows and two boars are collared.

Bears have been captured from all over the peninsula – from Johnson Pass to Homer, and from the Swanson River to the Snow River near Seward. All have been fitted with radio transmitters and some include satellite or (global positioning system) transmitters. This technology has provided fascinating insights into the lives of Kenai brown bears.

Some of the things we have learned about these bears is they den not only in the Kenai Mountains but also in the lowland forests. Dens occur in uplands of mixed aspen and spruce, avalanche chutes, mountain-side caves, alder thickets and under fallen beetle-killed spruce. Dens occur from near sea level up to 5,000 feet.

The first bears entered dens in mid-September, and the last entered dens during late November. Male bears tend to emerge from their winter slumber first, followed by lone sows and then sows with cubs. While

tracking bears on May 2 and 3, almost all were still located in or near den sites. Some bears roam large distances while others have relatively small home ranges. One bear in 1996 roamed from Mystery Creek in May and June to North Kenai in July and then to the upper Swanson River in September. Males typically have larger home ranges than females.

While brown bears are generally solitary (excepts for sows with cubs), they do concentrate where food is plentiful. The peninsula has several streams choked with salmon in late summer, and bears use this food source to the fullest. It is not unusual for 15 to 35 brown bears to be feeding on salmon along a short stretch of river or stream. These areas need protection to ensure bears' nutritional needs are met for their long winter sleep.

Telemetry also has provided an indication of mortality of brown bears, both natural and human caused. This past year, we located one radio collar in the Kenai River and another in a small lake south of Soldotna. The unreported killing of brown bears is an important management concern for this species.

Local interest in brown bears was evident by the recent success of the first Brown Bear Festival held at Skyview High School last November. The festival provided a forum for getting information out to the public about brown bears and how we can best co-exist with bears and resolve some potential problems. We can all help protect bears by storing garbage properly or hauling it to an approved dump site, keeping pets and small livestock in a secure building at night, not providing suet and birdseed during summer months and storing pet and livestock feed in bear-proof containers.

Protection of habitat is critical to any species. Conserving bear habitat and populations is a purpose of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and one of my jobs is keeping track of bears.

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